

Message
1 September
Social Principles of the UMC

Message: Our Social Principles – Preamble

I am doing something different for this month of September. I am going to focus on our Social Principles. Our statement of how we believe we should move through the world – caring for creation and caring for each other. It is always so amazing to me that John Wesley understood so profoundly that in order to follow Jesus, to be disciples, we not only need to worship God through our praying and singing and studying, but also through loving kindness, good works and social justice. This is part of our denominational DNA.

John Wesley took Jesus’s questions for the sheep and the goats at the last day seriously. Have you fed the hungry? Have you given water to the thirsty? Clothed the naked? Visited those in prison? And when we, like Wesley, take these questions seriously, we find ourselves looking to understand and perhaps fix the problems that allow people to hunger and thirst and not have adequate shelter and end up in prison. Remember, in Wesley’s time, one could end up in prison for being in debt. How are your credit card bills looking?

Anyway, our denomination has a long and rich history of concern for social justice issues. We even have a Board of Church and Society which is housed in the only privately owned building on Capitol Hill in Washington DC – that building was built by the United Methodist Women and its predecessors. It was built so we had a presence near our lawmakers. The United Methodist Church wanted Child Labor Laws, Prohibition, and to make boxing illegal. Yes, I know that last one is a little weird, but boxing was seen as a violent sport that promoted gambling.

The United Methodist Church was the very first Christian Church to write down and adopt a social creed which called for, “equal rights and complete justice for all men in all stations of life.” The Social Principles have never been considered Church Law – you don’t need to 100% agree with everything in our social principles to be able to be called a United Methodist in good standing. This is good for me, because I have often disagreed with some of the stances outlined in our social principles. For instance, I occasionally enjoy a glass of wine, and I know I am not the only United Methodist that does this. This goes against our social principles of not drinking alcohol. I know pastors and lay people, and so do you, who smoke tobacco, either in cigarettes, cigars, or pipes. Smoking is against our social principles. I even know pastors and laypeople who have gone to *Turning Stone* and gambled. Gambling is also against our social principles.

But our social principles are not only what we are against. They also tell us things that we are for: like recycling, green energy, the humane treatment of animals, the humane treatment of prisoners.

This is how our social principles begin, “We, the people called United Methodist, affirm our faith in the living God, who created everything that is and called it good, and created human beings in God’s own image. We give thanks for Jesus Christ, incarnation of God’s love and our Savior, who redeems and heals our relationship with God. We trust in the movement of the Holy Spirit, transforming human lives and the whole creation. Further, we declare our faith that God’s grace is available to all and “nothing can separate us from God’s love in Christ Jesus our Lord: not death or life, not angels or rulers, not present things or future things, not powers or height or depth, or any other thing that is created.” (Romans 8:38-39)¹

¹ Preamble of the Social Principles of the United Methodist Church, 2024.

There is so much to unpack just in this opening statement. We believe that creation is good. We believe that human beings are inherently good. We believe this because in the Bible – in Genesis, when God was creating the world, God called the creation and everything in it – good.

We believe that God extends grace to everyone, and nothing can separate us from God. Nothing can take you away from God. Nothing can force you away from God, and even more importantly, Jesus came, Jesus incarnated as a human baby to redeem and heal our relationship with God.

The preamble goes on to outline how God loves us and want us to live in harmony with each other and all of creation. It specifically says that we honor the dignity of all beings. ALL Beings. And part of how we do this is by respecting the differences in understanding and expressing faith, in gifts and practices of ministry, and in life experiences, as shaped by ethnicities, cultures, communities, abilities, age, sexual orientation and gender. We as United Methodists affirm our belief in the inestimable worth of each and every individual, recognizing that God has given each of us unique gifts.

The preamble also says this, “Differences are a precious gift AND daunting challenge. They can stretch the church’s capacity to live and minister faithfully. Yet..”² Yet this is what we are called to do. We are called to engage in the challenge of listening even when we do not agree on all matters.

In this time when everywhere we turn there are messages of brokenness, division, and hate for those we don’t agree with, we as United Methodist Christians are called to listen, to converse, and to remember that the other is also a human being, made in the likeness, the image, of God. We are called to love, to peace, to wholeness. I love how the preamble ends, it states that we should accept controversies as the proof, the evidence that God is not yet finished with us. That God’s plan is not yet done. That God is still working to make us and creation that very good thing that God has created us to be.

² *ibid*, emphasis mine